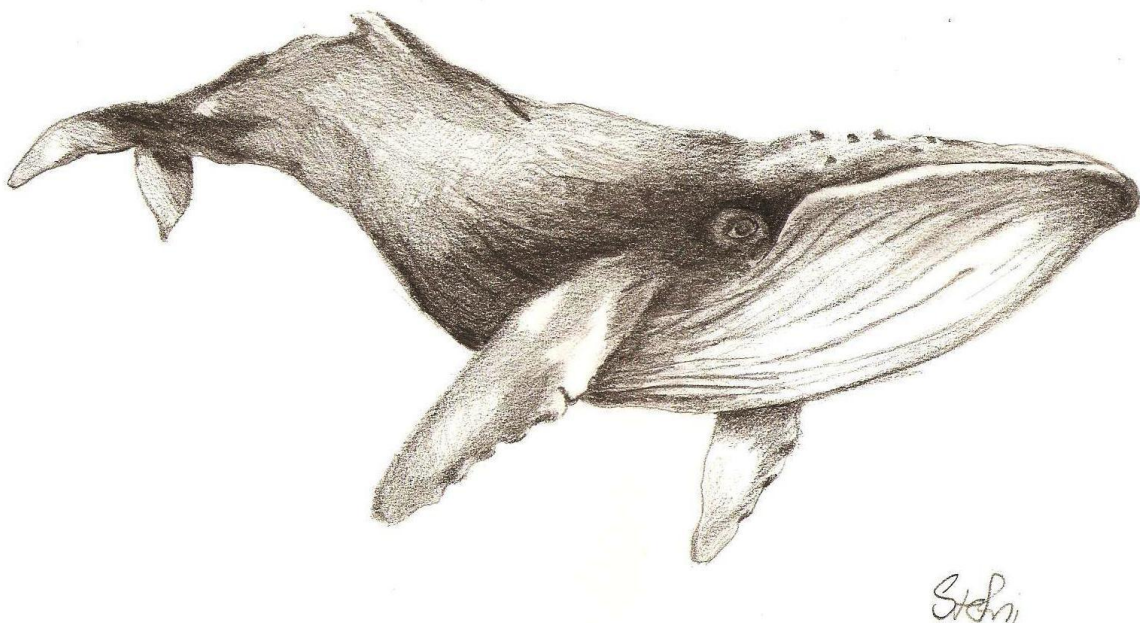


Jonah and the 'whale'

Tale or truth?

The fascinating 'story' about Jonah and the 'whale' is one of the best-known whale stories of all time. The Bible tells us how the prophet Jonah was instructed by the Lord to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh to preach and appeal to the inhabitants to repent of their sins. However, Jonah rebelled against the Lord and boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, the most remote Phoenician outpost at that time. The Lord sent a violent storm so that the ship and its crew were in danger of going under. Lots were drawn by the crew to determine who was responsible for this misfortune. The lot fell on Jonah, and at his own request he was cast into the sea. Immediately afterwards the storm abated. The Lord sent a 'great fish', which might well have been a whale, to swallow Jonah. After three days and three nights in the belly of the 'whale' Jonah was vomited out on dry land. After this incident Jonah obeyed the Lord. He travelled to Nineveh to preach a message of repentance and the entire population repented of their sins and turned away from their evil ways.

For many people this account about Jonah and the 'whale' constitutes a major stumbling block. It is simply too far-fetched to be true, especially when it comes to Jonah surviving inside the fish for three days and nights. However, we can accept the account of Jonah and the 'whale' as true history if we remember that God is a God of miracles, and that for Him nothing is impossible, including keeping somebody alive in the belly of a 'whale' for three days and nights or even raising somebody from the dead as was the case with Lazarus (John 11:1-44) and perhaps Jonah as well. According to David Pawson's interpretation of Jonah 2, Jonah actually drowned before he was



swallowed by the 'whale' and was brought back to life again by God after being vomited out on dry land.¹ Apart from the fact that Jonah remained in the belly of the 'whale' for three days and three nights, whether dead or alive, we read about several other miracles in the account of Jonah that should be considered - some of which entailed the divinely directed use of natural phenomena. These miracles were:

- '... the Lord sent out a great wind upon the sea, and there was a violent tempest on the sea ...' (Jonah 1:4).
- 'Now the Lord had prepared and appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah' (Jonah 1:17).
- 'And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land (Jonah' 2:10).
- '... the people of Nineveh believed in God and proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth [in penitent mourning], from the greatest of them even to the least of them' (Jonah 3:5).
- '... the Lord God prepared a gourd and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head ...' (Jonah 4:6).
- '... God prepared a cutworm when the morning dawned the next day, and it smote the gourd so that it withered' (Jonah 4:7).
- '... God prepared a sultry east wind ...' (Jonah 4:8).

If one wanted to explain Jonah's survival in the belly of the fish in a more 'scientific' manner, one could consider the case of the sailor who fell overboard a trawler in the English Channel and was swallowed by a gigantic whale shark. In order to give the sailor a Christian burial, the whale shark was hunted down by the trawler fleet and was killed 48 hours after the incident. When the whale shark was cut open, the sailor was found unconscious but alive. He was rushed to a hospital, where the doctor declared that he was suffering from nothing but shock.² Since the ancient Hebrews idiomatically counted a part of a day as a whole

¹ Pawson, pp. 449-450.

² Grigg (online).

Mat 12:38-41 (AMP)

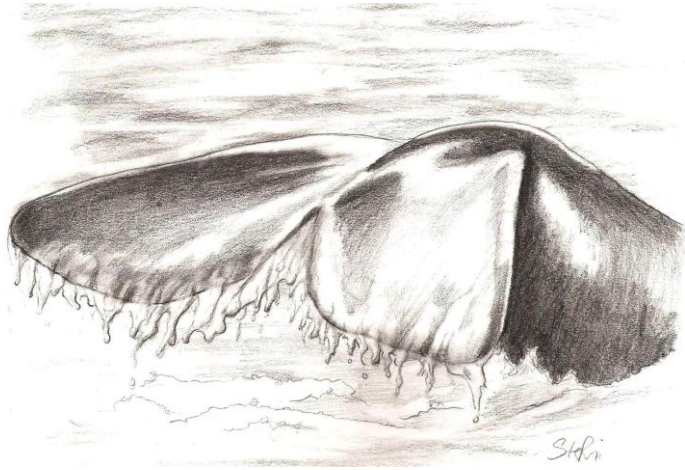
Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, Teacher, we desire to see a sign or miracle from You [proving that You are what You claim to be]. But He replied to them, an evil and adulterous generation (a generation morally unfaithful to God) seeks and demands a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For even as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. [Jonah 1:17] The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, Someone more and greater than Jonah is here! [Jonah 3:5]

Luke 11:29-30 (AMP)

Now as the crowds were [increasingly] thronging Him, He began to say, This present generation is a wicked one; it seeks and demands a sign (miracle), but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah [the prophet]. [Jonah 1:17] For [just] as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will also the Son of Man be [a sign] to this age and generation. [Jonah 3:4-10.]

day, the 'three days and three nights' that Jonah spent in the belly of the 'whale' could have been as short as 38 hours, which makes his survival inside the 'whale' all the more possible.³

Apart from the fact that the account of Jonah and the 'whale' should be seen as historically true, there is an even greater truth to be considered. Just as Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, our Lord Jesus Christ spent three days and nights in the heart of the earth after He died on the Cross of Calvary for you and me. Afterwards He was resurrected to triumph over sin and death so that we may be reconciled to the Father and receive life eternal if we believe in and accept this act of love. Every individual who takes this step becomes born again spiritually and receives the Holy Spirit as an indwelling guest. The Holy Spirit empowers every believer to grow spiritually by overcoming sin. Only Christ was worthy of paying the penalty for our sins that was demanded by the holiness of God. There is no righteous deed we can do to receive salvation and forgiveness of sins. We can make no contribution in this regard, not even the smallest of contributions. We have to come to Christ empty-handed, for forgiveness can only be received by grace and through faith. This is not fiction, but rather a life-changing Truth that will determine where you will spend eternity.



The Way to Salvation

- ***Acknowledge** that you are a sinner and that you are guilty before God (Romans 3:23).*
- ***Repent** of your sins. Have a deep sorrow about your sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 3:19).*
- ***Confess** your sins to God and to everybody you have wronged (1 John 1:9).*
- ***Reject** your sins. Tell God that you are prepared to turn your back on your sinful ways (Isaiah 55:7).*
- ***Believe** that Christ died for your sins (John 3:16; Mark 16:16).*
- ***Receive** this free gift of salvation from God and make it your own (John 1:11-12).*

³ Grigg (online).



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Further reading

Grigg, Russell (Online). 'Jonah and the great fish' <http://creation.com/jonah-and-the-great-fish> (Access date: 17 July 2013)

Pawson, J. David (2007). **Unlocking the Bible**, pp. 444-455. London: Collins.